

New Foundations

Volumes 1-3

1947-1950

With an Introduction by

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Introduction

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Introduction

The title *New Foundations* is from a line in the Socialist hymn, "The Internationale": "The earth shall rise on new foundations." The image implies a hope linked to a program, a vision of a future embodied in an ideology. In its credo the magazine proclaimed itself "devoted to the political, cultural and intellectual problems of American students" (the list is slightly misleading, for cultural and intellectual were clearly subsumed under political), with the purpose of stimulating "clear thinking and progressive social action." The inseparability of thought and action is an essential feature of the world-view projected in *New Foundations*: not to have served as an instrument of political action would have been a betrayal of the magazine's principles. The principles were Marxist, of the variety now identified as Stalinist—that is, Marxism as interpreted by the Communist party (an editorial refers scornfully to the fact that in universities "Sidney Hook, Koestler and even Trotsky are offered as 'authorities' " of Marxism).

The distinction between serving as an instrument of a potential mass movement and as an organ for a party—the distinction between a stimulant and a dogma—is sometimes impossible to detect in the magazine. The editors openly expressed their sympathy with American Youth for Democracy (A.Y.D.) and Labor Youth League (L.Y.L.)—both tied to the Communist party. With a revised format introduced in 1951 ("a more popular appearance in order to better reach the vast numbers of students who can be won to act for Peace"), the magazine revised and expanded its credo to make more explicit its commitment to "the philosophy of Marxism-Leninism, the philosophy of Socialism," and to "affirm our friendship with the Labor Youth League." In part the magazine may indeed have originated, as the first issue declared, "in the imagination of a group of overseas Marines who foresaw that student America would need a channel of expression after the war," but more consequential foundations seem to have been within established Marxist groups.

The magazine's explicit effort was to cultivate an interest in Marxism among students. The tone and style of the effort reflect the intimidating political climate of the late 1940's and early 1950's—the opening years of the Cold War and of McCarthyism. "*New Foundations* actively combats reactionary and fascist ideologies in all their manifestations," announced the credo which appeared in every issue. The magazine made its attempts at persuasion and conversion and stimulation to political action against a background of increasing public and government hostility to the Communist party and suspected radicals. These were years of rapid decline in membership in the C.P. and its affiliates, and virtual expulsion from the main avenues of political life in the United States. Like the C.P. itself, *New Foundations* tried to explain the attacks upon radical and Marxist groups as part of a concerted drive by American capitalism toward suppression of dissent at home and domination abroad. The atmosphere of hostility and fear and suppression of Communists unavoidably set the tone of the magazine as defensive and polemical.

It directed its appeal to students, especially veterans, who were troubled by the signs of reaction in post-war America—the widely publicized investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the blacklists, Universal Military Training, what seemed to be the increasingly aggressive stance of American foreign policy, discrimination and lynchings, the arrest and imprisonment of Communists, the firing of professors, and finally, the Korean War. Articles frequently concluded with slogans for action: Defeat the Mundt-Nixon Bill! Halt the drive

for a third world war! Stop the drive towards fascism! Implicit as a leitmotif throughout was the warning: "Act Today! Tomorrow you may be silenced." And running as a major theme concurrently was the magazine's central assertion: "Marxism shines as a beacon-light to a ship-wrecked world."

The distinctive features of the magazine, including its rhetoric, derive from its foundation in a theory which was also a party doctrine. It aimed to cultivate not merely political awareness and action, but "a sound Marxist approach": not enough to think and act, but to think and act *correctly*. Soundness was apparently a matter of conformance to a position or a line hammered out somewhere behind the scenes, for controversy as to what constituted sound Marxism rarely appeared in the pages of *New Foundations* (there were some exceptions, usually on cultural matters; but the pages did not seem open to any criticism of Marxism as such). The reader was presented with the assumption, expressed by the magazine's style and tone as well as its content, that "soundness" had already been achieved. Titles of articles, such as "Against the Equilibrists," or "Tito—Menace to Peace and Socialism," are one indication of what was considered "sound." The tone of editorial rhetoric (and frequently it is difficult to distinguish either by tone or substance an essay on art or a book review from an editorial) also conveyed a sense of conviction of correctness.

It is not, of course, surprising to find doctrinal correctness as a prominent aspect of the magazine's political policy. It implies an attitude more innocent than naïve, a belief in an essentially simple world, in which historical truth is always self-evident to the person properly equipped to detect it. Accompanying innocence was an unmistakable passion, if not always for truth then certainly for justice. The world-view of *New Foundations* politicised all of reality, or at least assumed rather blandly that all of reality was capable of political interpretation, and required it. Not that the assumption is itself invalid; but the singleminded attempt to see everything through the lens of a "sound Marxist approach" resulted in a number of distortions.

One extreme instance occurs in Volume 2. A rather favorable appraisal of William Faulkner appeared in an essay by Jack Kroner, identified as a veteran, a graduate student of English, and a member of the Editorial Board. The essay argued for Faulkner's importance as a writer whose world "contains a very important section of objective and subjective reality." "Although Faulkner's solution can hardly be recommended as a progressive one," Kroner writes, "his picture of the world is hostile in that it will provoke numerous doubts in the reader's mind. He has captured and refined an aspect of the contradictions of bourgeois life, previously unreached in American letters."

Two issues later (Vol. 2, No. 3), an editorial supported by two letters appeared under the heading, "Against White Supremacist Attitudes." The title was directed against Kroner. In his essay, we learn, he had failed "to fulfill the primary function of a Marxist: to combat chauvinistic (bourgeois) ideology." The crux of the criticism was that Kroner had neglected to attack and condemn Faulkner for facism (as well as for his "abominable obscurantist style"). This failure in turn "produces the same result as if he himself had expressed chauvinistic beliefs and indicates that he himself has accepted them." In consequence Kroner was suspended from the Editorial Board: "first, because the board cannot have as a member anyone who has expressed openly chauvinistic attitudes [although he was accused only of failing openly to express anti-racist attitudes] until he has shown that he has overcome them; and second, because the members feel that he should devote his full attention to his own further struggle to overcome these attitudes."

Literary criticism can become a harrowing affair under these conditions. The editors concluded that "there can be no fundamental disagreement among Marxists concerning the criticism of the chauvinistic content of Kroner's article." And apparently they were right, for in the next issue, Kroner agreed entirely, and even attacked his defenders (whose letters never appeared in print). He confessed to "having been taken in, along with Faulkner, by the restricted realm of bourgeois categories," recognized that "chauvinism, today, is the foremost weapon of bourgeois ideology," and admitted that "my tacit acceptance of chauvinistic concepts was a 'concession to imperialism and fascism.'" And in a sentence which raises issues only to evade them, Kroner wrote, "If we enjoy Faulkner and are, at times, moved by him, it is not out of health but out of sickness. He appeals to that in us which is utterly sick and bourgeois." Kroner was, we learn from an editorial note to his Reply, reinstated on the Board out of respect for his "willingness and ability to struggle against white chauvinism."

This incident dramatizes a dilemma at the heart of *New Foundations*—one which remained unresolved, indeed unarticulated, in its seven years of publication. The dilemma is the desire on the part of many student and intellectual radicals to serve two impulses at once: the impulse toward a life of art and ideas, and an impulse toward a life of political action. In a curiously distorted way, the editors' attack and Kroner's submission may have expressed a desire to act responsibly in the face of a politically sick world—a desire to do and say the right thing to improve the world. The young people who wrote for *New Foundations* seemed convinced of the world-historical importance of their words, convinced that every word was an action, and needed to be judged in light of the "sound Marxist approach." The hope was that such judgments would in the end serve art and culture by creating a world in which they might flourish.

Almost as an ironic prophecy, the opening editorial in Vol. 1, No. 1, began by citing these words of the British scientist Hyman Levy regarding a young mathematician who had died fighting for the Loyalists in Spain:

I could see in him the eternal conflict that tears asunder the soul of all that is best in the younger generation—the desire to enjoy the fruits of culture and the necessity to sacrifice oneself for its preservation.

Sacrifice can take other forms than physical death. The idea of a historical necessity runs like a deep flood in the pages of *New Foundations*—especially notable perhaps because the journal is addressed to students, who stand on the threshold of lasting commitments. One of the appeals of Marxism in the twentieth century, especially in America, has been its apparent ability to bridge the awesome chasm between culture and politics—to provide intellectuals with a ready-made synthesis of thought and action. The editorial continues to claim that Marxism is more than "a scientific, ethical and cooperative solution" to exploitation and oppression—more than a "political and economic system"; it is also "an all-embracing philosophical synthesis whose principles are derived from the critical evaluation of all practical and intellectual pursuits; and its principles and methods are richly applicable to every field of study and activity." It seemed capable of accommodating the most divergent desires and interests.

The early numbers of *New Foundations* devoted a remarkable amount of space to "cultural" matters: graphics, poems, stories, criticism (an editorial note at the end of Vol. 1 complains that almost ninety percent of all submitted material was literary: not enough history, science, and politics). Later, in response to

increasing government pressure against Communists and the perilous state of academic and other freedoms, topical issues came to predominate in the magazine, though not exclusively. But whether the magazine made a convincing case for the "all-embracing philosophical synthesis" of Marxism, or whether it submitted the crucial question of how a "sound Marxist approach" is arrived at to honest discussion, is another matter. The desire for soundness itself seemed often to obliterate any promising dialectical exchange of ideas which might lead to synthesis. Antitheses were rare indeed.

The impact of Marxist thought—and the influence of the Communist party—upon student and labor radicalism in the post-war period is a separate matter. It is clear that an examination of *New Foundations* will be essential to any historian who undertakes that project. In the late 1960's the language of *New Foundations* seems already dated, echoes from another era. The revelations about Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was a great divide, and what may have seemed "sound" before that event seemed shattered and confused and false afterwards. But a historian will no doubt be able to reconstruct a continuity which does not now seem to exist between the efforts to form a Marxist student movement in the late 1940's and 1950's, and the apparently spontaneous outburst of student radicalism in the middle 1960's.

The historical interest of *New Foundations* may lie in its attempt to serve a perhaps premature purpose. The Stalinist rhetoric and the links with specific organizations were surely barriers to any genuine mass appeal. And the tone of humorless self-righteousness must indeed have interfered with the message. But the intention of the journal, to provide a major national periodical to deal with culture as well as politics, particularly from the point of view of students, has a strong appeal. The stress on a particular theoretical framework may have resulted in harmful exclusions and distortions. But the insistence on the importance of theory for radical political action is a positive note. It might be useful for student radicals of the 1960's, as well as for historians, to look through *New Foundations*—if mainly to learn to avoid its mistakes, but also, perhaps, to pick up a hint or two.

—Alan Trachtenberg
State College, Penn., 1968

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—dr. howard selsam

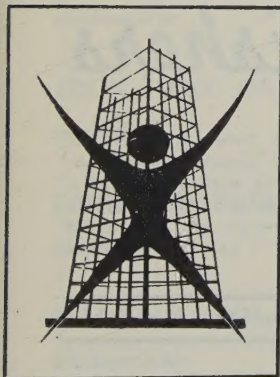
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KARL MARX: STUDENT

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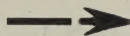
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